



## Language Support for Migrants *A Council of Europe Toolkit*

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### Tool 26 - Dealing with grammar when providing language support

**Aim: To offer guidance on including some grammar activities in language support for migrants to aid their language learning.**

You can learn a language by training yourself to use it for everyday purposes, for example, by learning to ask for directions, to say what you did the previous day, to read instructions about assembling a piece of furniture or understanding safety rules etc. In the Toolkit this way of organizing language learning and getting learners to practise takes the form of 'scenarios' (see Tool 54 – *Introduction to using scenarios in language support for migrants*).

You can also focus certain language support activities on the grammar of the language. This is a longstanding approach to language learning and is still common for certain languages and in certain countries. Migrant learners in your groups may have experienced a grammatical approach when learning their first language or foreign languages, especially when writing the language, at school so they may be expecting learning activities that focus on grammar. Although they are not very enjoyable, for learners whose first languages are very different from the target language grammar exercises are often seen as reassuring and useful. Also, in particular adult learners often ask for grammar because they feel the need to rely on "rules" of some kind about the language they are learning.

Here are some suggestions about dealing with grammar when providing language support for migrant language learners.

- **Find out whether learners in your group are expecting to learn the grammar of the target language**
  - try to find out who in the group has done work on grammar when learning their first language or a foreign language
  - ask your learners if they like doing work on grammar and think that exercises of this kind are useful
  - explain the reasons why you will be doing work on grammar or, if not, why you will be doing only limited grammar work.

**If you decide to organise grammar exercises, follow these guidelines:**

- give priority to work on scenarios as suggested in the various scenario tools provided in the Toolkit
- focus on grammatical structures that are related to the communicative functions needed to do the scenario tasks, for example using negatives when refusing an invitation or suggestions, *e.g. No thank you. I don't have time*, or the using the conditional to make a request sound more polite *e.g. Could you make less noise, please*.
- try to avoid using technical terms like *noun, verb, adjective, plural, subject* etc. during language practice such as scenarios as these may be difficult for some learners to understand. Use terms like these only if you need to talk about the categories of words in the exercises.

- use diagrams, drawings or illustrations when giving simple descriptions of grammatical features of the language such as word order or changes in word endings
- use clear examples to illustrate common features of the language, e.g.
  - *She plays football on Sundays. She played football yesterday*
  - *The boys play loud music in the evening, but they don't play it in the daytime.*
- do not give long explanations, for example of the uses of the definite article in English. Take account of the progress each learner is making in the language (see Tool 20 - [Setting objectives for learning support of migrants who are beginners in the new language](#)).
- only use rote learning (learning by heart) when necessary, for example for common irregular past tense forms in English such as *went, ate, had* etc.
- instead of presenting or describing a feature of grammar yourself, first ask learners to try to explain it in their own words
- if you use practice exercises, get learners to work in pairs to encourage them to think about and explain the reasons for their answers. It is not enough for learners to give the right answers: they need to understand how the grammar works
- suggest that learners do additional exercises on their own to reinforce their learning, e.g. as homework, using grammar apps etc.
- remember that the aim of grammar exercises is to support language learning, so it is not necessary to assess or mark learners' answers. You only need to offer feedback or invite feedback from other learners (ways of giving feedback are discussed in Tool 27 - [Assessing language learning and giving supportive feedback](#)).
- encourage learners to think about grammar by comparing certain features of the target language with their first languages, such as word order, how negatives work, whether pronouns are used, etc. For example, in work in pairs or small groups, learners with different or the same first languages can explain and discuss some important differences between the grammar of the new language and the grammar of their first languages.